SOME TABOOS AND SUPERSTITIONS IN MEDIEVAL MITHILA[1]

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A large part of North Bihar has been known as Mithila since ancient times. However, for administrative purposes this area has been commonly known as 'Tirabhukti' or 'Tirhut'. The 'tarai' or the Southern portion of the kingdom of Nepal inclusive of the lower ranges of hills was included in this territory.[2] Recently, 'Mithila' or 'Mithilanchal' is becoming common once again.[3]

Mithila, the stronghold of Brahmanical culture[4] had its own peculiar customs and beliefs. There were various rules of taking food material in medieval mithila. "Siddhanna" and "Asidhanna" were the two types of eating material.[5] Some material which had to be cooked on fire for eating used to become "Apaita" and were called "Siddhanna"—viz; pulse, rice, vegetable, bread. These were generally cooked in milk or water. Such food could not be taken by all, if touched by anyone. This rule was followed by people of all the four varnas in Mithila. Brahmanas took "Siddhanna" only with their close relations and with their own group in a village (Saujania). "Siddhanna" used to become unfit for consumption even by the Brahmanas, if touched by following types of people in such conditions—unmarried girl, very small child (anunit balak), people without having bath, without having cleaned feets; people without "Suchi" (cleaning of body with the help of certain rules). If one touched "Siddhanna" while himself eating, again by this way he used to make

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1. This article is a part of author's proposed Ph.D. work, which is being done under Dr. J. C. Jha, University Professor and Head, P. G. Department of History, Patna University, Patna.
2. Vijayakanta Mishra, *Cultural Heritage of Mithila*, Allahabad, 1979, p. 5.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 367.
5. Umesh Mishra, *Maithili Sanskriti O Sabhyata*, Vol. II, pp. 35-36.

   This book was published from Laheriasarai, Darbhanga, but the date of publication is not available. This book gives the most detailed information on the subject.

that food uneatable. If "Siddhanna" was kept on ground without cleaning that with water, it used to become uneatable (apaita). If Shudra, dog or cat crossed the place where "Siddhanna" was kept, then also that food could not be taken by Brahmanas.[6] If food was cooked in a particular room and had to be taken to another place for eating, water had to be sprinkled on all the way on which a person with that food would go.

Generally, Brahmanas who were very poor ('daridra') and of very small 'kula' (ancestral family) used to take "Siddhanna" food in the house of the Brahmins of high "kulas". Although Brahmins of high "kulas" did not take "Siddhanna" in the house of the Brahmins of small "kulas". The main cause of this was that, generally among the people of small "kulas" much sacredness was not found.

"Asiddhanna" was one which, was not cooked on fire, in water or milk, for example "chuda" (prepared from "paddy" by beating it) etc. Bread cooked in "ghee" was also called "Asiddhanna".[7] Therefore people offered "Chuda" and curd, "pudi" (bread cooked in ghee) and vegetable as food to those who were not their close relation (Asaujaniyan). This was the main reason why, Brahmins of Mithila generally felt the approval of "Shashtras" (religious texts) in eating "pudi" and vegetable offered by people of other varnas. But Brahmins did not consider pudi cooked in ghee as pure, if offered by any other Brahmans.

To accept the grains of others like Shudras, Patitas (those who were unclean with socially and religiously) etc. for eating was never considered tenable by the Brahmins of Mithila.[8]

In the Varnaratnakar, Vivadratnakar etc. there are a lot of delicacies of Mithila referred. Candesvara and other Nibemdhakaras have repeated the old rules relating to the food and drink.[9]

Jyotirshwar Thakur in his Dhurtasamagamnataka has referred to meat and fish among of other items of food.[10] Candesvara justified meat

6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p. 36.
8. Ibid.
9. Radhakrishna Choudhary, *Mithila in the Age of Vidyapati*, Varanasi, 1976, p. 162.
10. Quoted in R. K. Choudhary, op. cit. p. 163,

eating and gave certain rules for the same. According to Grihastharatnakar; such occasions were those (i) when the meat is purified with mantras for the purpose of sacrifice or (ii) where there is the risk of a man losing his life otherwise, (iii) when the meat is procured by the man himself and (iv) when the meat is purchased and taken after the worship of Gods.[11] Candesvara in his book has given a long list which included among other things, onions, garlic and some plants etc.

Candesvara and others have prescribed rules regarding the prohibition of food. The prohibitions have been classified as under.[12]

(a) Ucchistanna—leavings specially of animals, outcastes and women,

(b) Asucisams-prstanna—food touched by unclean animals and outcastes,

(c) Asneidravyasams prstanna—food contaminated by unclean things,

(d) Bhavadusta—food relating to sight,

(e) Kaladusta—stale food and food which may not be taken in particular months, days or hours. Raddish is prohibited in the month of Magha, meat on full and new moon days, curds at night and noon,

(f) Parigrahanna—food from persons having specified vocations; e.g. physicians, actors, etc.,

(g) Asaneaparigrahanna—food from persons ceremonially impure e.g. because of birth and death,

(h) Aputradayanna—food from childless persons—A Brahmana should also not take food cooked by his own daughter,

(i) Hastadana dikriya dustanna—food given by hand etc. which should be given by a spoon; food at feasts where thieves, outcastes, etc. are invited; food offered at Sraddhas of non-Brahmanas,

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11. R. K. Choudhary, op. cit. p. 164, Quoted in Also see Francis Buchanan, *An Account of the district of Purnea in 1809-10*, 1928, p. 258.
12. R. K. Choudhary, op. cit. Quoted in, p. 258.

(j) Svabhavadusta—unclean things,

(k) Jatidusta—articles specially prohibited.

Candesvara, on the basis of earlier authorities, has suggested that one should not eat food touched by particular birds and animals.[13] Food not actually touched but even smelt by dogs and cows were prohibited in medieval mithila.

Mithila was the stronghold of the Brahmanical religion in the medieval period.[14] Religion and custom had enough control on the common man in the society. Religion and custom also regarded something forbidden for not to be touched or spoken of etc. We can call these as taboo. They were the following :

In general condition men of the four varnas if touched by Achopa (unclean) and Turuka (muslim), considered it essential to take bath and to make body and cloth sacred by sprinkling Ganga water. Even changing of Yagnjopavita (sacred thread) was considered essential.[15]

During meal taking time, touching anyone was prohibited. However, anyone if touched by a Brahmin with washed feet, then it was not considered so unclean. But when two Brahmins, while eating, if touched each other, they were considered to become unclean and it then used to become essential for them to leave that food material. If they (the Brahmins) got touched by people of other varnas while eating, then it was even considered essential to make "prayaschit" (to follow certain socio-religious rules for the bad action done) for that.

A Brahmin also ought not to have touched any "asuchiyukta varna" while worshipping the gods and the time after taking bath and worshipping. Water touched by a "asuchiyukta" man and "Salkania" (people of backward caste in a village whose water was considered not fit for drinking by Brahmins) was not considered fit for puja (worship). If on any varandah of straw, there was a "achopa" (Salkan etc.), then eating

13. Ibid., p. 259.

14. Yogakar Jha, *The Social History of Mithila* (*14th to 16th c. A. D.*), P. U., Ph.D. Thesis No. 357, 1969, p. 196.

15. Umesh Mishra, *Maithil Sanskriti O Sabhyata* Vol. II, p. 32.

food and drinking water was prohibited thereon. If on a tree there was any "achopa" already, then climbing that tree while he was there and eating fruits thereon was considered a sin. If violated, "prayaschit" was necessary for that, it was considered wrong to offer pranam by a clean person, to one who was eating.[16]

Many people considered it wrong to touch anybody after coming from latrine, before changing dress and having a fresh bath. But this was followed by very few people. However, besides solhakans (backward and unclean castes), all people of Mithila, kept yagnopavita on ear during latrine to keep it clean. They also kept towels etc. on head to keep them clean. Except head, all the body was considered to become unclean during latrine time.[17]

Pure water which was meant for worshipping gods ('acchinjal') etc. could be taken only from a Brahmin who was in a pure condition ('Shuchi'). Water kept in one pot, if taken by a Brahmin, could not be taken by another also. For him fresh water in fresh cleaned pot was necessary. To drink water in a pot by touching mouth with it was considered wrong. So people did have water in a glass, or if from a pot (called "lota") then by not touching it. Touching water by nail used to make the water impure. Clothes which came from washermen's house, even if dried, was considered impure. Dhoti, towels etc. which was used daily, could be used only when poured in pure water. Cotton cloth when once left out after wearing even for a few hours, could not be used again before pouring in pure water and drying. If a cloth was touched by any "achopa" it was considered impure. Stitched cloth and cloth not washed at least in pure water was also considered impure (asuddha).[18]

People of any varna, if commited any act which was considered prohibitive ('Patityakarma') in society, knowingly or unknowingly, unless they got themselves free of that action by following certain well set rules, their body remained impure. For that time no one remained with them. They remained in a separte place, like any "achopa" for that time.

16. Ibid., pp. 32-33.
17. Ibid., p. 33.
18. Ibid., p. 36.

Knowingly or unknowingly, those who kept themselves in company with such "patitas" (one who did such prohibitive acts) were also considered "Patitas".[19]

During the period of impurity due to death of a close one, or even due to a birth in a close family for ten days people considered themselves impure. These two were called "Maranasaucha" and "Janmasaucha" respectively. Although during "Janmasaucha" (impurity due to birth of a new one), people did not follow rules so rigidly, as they did during "Maranasaucha" (impurity due to death of a close one). People did not follow rules so rigidly, as they did during "Maranasaucha" impurity due to death of a close one, still, main works were left out for the period of "asaucha" (impurity). For example, doing worship of god and "gurujanas", having feast during "Brahaman Bhojans" in the line of pure Brahmans having hair cut, touching oil, eating betel, having clothes cleaned from washermen. People used to leave out all these habits.[20]

The body of a person has considered impure unless while eating he cleaned his mouth and hands; after coming from latrine he cleaned his hands, feet, mouth etc. and had a bath with oil in body; if touched by achopa had a bath; doing bath after any "eclipse" (solar or lunar) and having bath again after "Ugras" (after sunset or sunrise). In the above condition, if one touched such person he also used to become impure. In these conditions, nor could anyone offer "pranam" to him, neither he could offer "ashirvad" to anyone.[21] These ideas were generally found in the people of all the varnas. During "Maranasaucha" (death in a close one and impurity thereby) anyone who already had his "Yagnopavita" sanskar, when he had his head clean shaved, also had his moustaches clean-shaved.[22]

Mithila is known not to India but throughout the world as a land of philosophers.[23] Perhaps as a result of this and for the reason also that

19. Ibid., p. 37.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Vijaya Kanta Mishra, *Cultural Heritage of Mithila*, p. 136.
23. Talk with Sri Jivananda Thakur of Village, Lohna in present Madhubani district has helped me in writing this article and giving some conclusions.

religion had enough control on general man, they developed ideas and practices founded on unreasoning belief in magic, witchcraft etc; irrational fear of what was unknown or mysterious.[24]

As for the ideas which may be called to be founded on unreasoning belief, the people in medieval Mithila, thought that everything happened due to any reason. The main reason for the creation of entire living system, according to them was action ('Karma').[25] Each and every action has its result. The creation of even a man depends on good or bad action of his in the previous life.[26] Every action has its effect on a man. This builds up the future "Samskar" for him.

According to them "punya" (good action) and "papa" (bad action) both are in this world. The action as a result of which one is benefited ('Kalyan') in this "lok" (world) and "Parlok" (the next life) is called "Punya". This also helps him in attaining his ultimate aim (param udyeshya). By doing "punya karma" (good action), people take birth in good "desha" (country), good yona (life), good house and remain happy. It is the "samskar" of "purvajanma" (the earlier life), which decides the birth of a particular man in low, high, small or big "kula" (family).[27]

It was considered essential to remain away from untouchables. The logic that was put to support this view was that in every man there are typical merits and demerits, as also a particular type of "electricity". By touching each other, these interchange the bodies. In any body, merits and demerits are not of one single life, but of so many. To remain pure it was considered essential not to touch an "untouchable". Purity in a person also helped him in his "adhyatmik marg" (religious path).[28]

The Maithilas like other people of India[29] believed that they were guarded by supernatural powers like various god, goddesses and even

24. Umesh Mishra, *Maithili Sanskriti O Sabhyata*, Vol. I, p. 1. Also see Mm. Pdt. Mukund Jha "Bakshi", Mithila Aaor Karmakanda, Mithila Mihir, Mithilanka 1936, pp. 17-20.
25. Umesh Mishra, op. cit. Vol. I, p. 1.
26. Umesh Mishra, op. eit. Vol. II, pp. 33-34.
27. Ibid.
28. R. B. Pandey, *Hindu Samskaras*, English Edition, p. 40.
29. Mukund Jha "Bakshi" Mithila Aaor Karmkand, Mithila Mihir, 1936, Mithilanka, p. 17.

ghosts who could bless them or do them some harm. Therefore, they regulated their activities by religious and semi-religious rites for the prosperity like the acquisition of cattle, progeny, longivity, wealth, intellect etc. and to secure heaven in the next world.[30]

The Maithilis worshipped various gods and goddesses, snakes, plants like Tulsi, trees like pipal, rivers like Ganga and so on.[31] The vogue of Saktism, and Tantricism (Mantrasastra) in Mithila has been responsible for a large number of vernacular charms used for working changes in the nature and behaviour of objects.[32] One may take these mantras and their uses as superstitions. The commonest vernacular 'mantras' were those which aimed to cure men who were bitten by serpents or who were suffering from some disease. These could cure a pecularily severe and persistent headache called "Adhakapari",[33] cataract of the eye, 'Huka' (severe pain in the back). The charms could even drive away ghosts and demons.[34] The love-charms of Mithila, were intended to win men or women, by reading at in a betel leaf which ought to be given to one whom one wanted to attract, allure or bewitch. The detection of a thief was done by preparing a charm which was painted on the nail where the thief was made to appear (Nakhadarpana mantra); or in distributing the charmed rice to the suspected men for chewing it when the thief could not chew it properly (canra-khuchaka mantra); or in making a vessel literally moved in the direction of the culprit, even when it was held tight by several strong men (Bati-caleba ka mantra in Sanskrit).[35] There were mantras which even enabled men to control the powers of the nature for the benefit of the community. When a fire broke out, one who knew these mantras, could check the fire from spreading beyond the house where it had begun (agni-banha-ka mantra), or could check the wind from blowing (Vayubanha-ka mantra).[36]

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30. Yogakar Jha, op. cit., p. 196.
31. Jayakanta Mishra, "*Introduction to the Folk literature of Mithila*", Part II, Prosed *University of Alllahabad studies* 1951. English Section p. 5.
32. Ibid., p. 6.
33. Ibid., p. 7.
34. Ibid., pp. 8-9.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., p. 15.

The earliest recorded folktales of Mithila go back to about 14th century A. D.[37] In this category, vrata-kathas were stories connected with the vratas (fasting) of Maithila women. They were made of vernacular legends eulogising the observance of a particular vrata and consisted of stories purporting to explain its objects or its mythological or legendary origin. Their recitation was believed to bring longevity, and happiness in a woman's married life. As a result of vrata on the occasion of "Jitya festival" in Asvin and recitation of vrata katha then, "Jimutvahana" was supposed to give longevity to the children of the vratee. The other vratakathas were, Kalika-vrata-Katha, Chathi-vrata-Katha, Marisano-vrata-Katha, Ravi-Sani-vrata Katha, Sapta-Vipata-Vrata-Katha, Batasavitri-vrata-Katha, Madhusrawani-Vrata-Katha etc.[38] These also reflect the superstitious belief of the people of Mithila.

The ghost stories were as numerous in Mithila as in other part of India. The ghosts were supposed to be able to assume all sorts of shapes. The 'Devi', the 'Cudaila', the 'Jina', the 'Brahma' (a son of Brahmana who died unmarried), 'Pisaca' and the 'Rakshasa' were the common Maithila spirits who were supposed to do great harm. One of the outstanding ghost stories relates that a Pandit Ramesvara Jha was asked by a group of ghosts to perform the marriage ceremony of a ghost girl.[39]

The tales of witches who were reputed to control some forms of spirits also full of mystery and wonder. They were said to have power to walk over water and to kill men or living them to life. There are also a list of tales where exorcists were known to drive away ghosts and even to compel witches to appear in public and disown their misdeees.[40]

Another very significant proof of superstitions in medieval Mithila can be said to be the sayings of "Daka" and people's total faith and belief in them. There are evidences to show that Daka was a Maithil.[41] Different scholars give different date and time for the existence of Daka. But almost

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37. Ibid., p. 16-27.
38. Ibid., p. 34-35.
39. Ibid., p. 35.
40. Jivananda Thakur, *Maithil Dak* 1949-50, Darbhanga, pp. 4-8.
41. Ibid., pp. 11-12 for Details see.

all agree that he existed in the medieval period.[42] There were many sayings of Daka which were (and even now) very frequently referred to by the people in day to day life. These distichs embody the proverbial wisdom of the land, astrological and agricultural maxims, guide for going on travel etc. and comment on the life and things of the region and many more things.[43] In about fiftyfive pages Sri Jivananda Thakur has recorded, only the sayings of Daka on almost all aspects in the life of a man, from the birth of a child to his death.

Through the couplets and sayings of Daka, people used to know on which day and moment to start a new work to make that a success. The guideline by Daka was laid on his couplets on "Siddhiyog".[44] If a child took birth in bad time, its result could be had from the sayings of Daka. Daka had prescribed proper time for the first bath of mother after she gave birth to a child. Daka even offered guidelines on when to breast-feed the child for the first time, when to cut a child's hair for the first time ('Mundan ceremony'); when to have a small hole in a boy's ear for putting metal ring there or even when to have his 'Upanayan' (yagnoypavita Samskar). Daka had much to say about the result of making a house in a particular "Nakshatra" (planet). For example he said that if a house was made in the time of "Soma" then it remained filled with milk and "sons" (meant all sorts of happiness).[45] But if the house was made in the time of "Sani" chances of death of female head remained there.[46] Even time and day was prescribed for having fresh straw on a house and removing the old one.[47]

In the matter of agricultural and forecasts relating to that Daka is still considered an authority in Mithila, what to talk of medieval period. Direction is seen in his couplets on which type of bull to purchase, what are the features of a good bull, when to plough a field, when to put

42. Makhan Jha, *Folk-lore Magic and legends of Mithila*, 1979, Patna, p. 84.

43. Jivananda Thakur, op. cit. p. 15 of poem section.

44. Ibid., p. 25—"सोमक दशा जों करी घर, सूंधे पूते भरी घर।"

45. Ibid., p. 26—"शनिक दशा जों करी घर, धर घरनी भरय पर।"

46. Ibid., p. 28.

47. Ibid., p. 32—"नाटा बड़ढ बहुरि आ जोइ, नहि धर बसए न खेती होइ।"

paddy sappling in a field and so on.[48] On almost every month of the year, Daka had lot to say about the happenings thereon and guidelines for working then.[49] Through the couplets of Daka people of Mithila used to know early that what type of cloud will bring rain or not, what type of wind will bring cloud or rain.[50] What type of sound of the birds, animals will bring epidemics, bad omens or fortunes to the people.

Daka was also considered an authority on things relating to travel. According to him, if one took journey towards left on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, the chance was of only success as through this process Rama had won Lanka. If on Saturday and Tuesday one took journey after taking meal, even the "Lakshmi" (Goddess of Wealth) that was no longer with him, will come back for him.[51] Though so many other couplets he directed the people of Mithila on these aspects, the way people followed these couplets and took them as expert guide on so many occasions, may force a modern observer to call them as superstitious activities.

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48. Ibid., pp. 36-42.
49. Ibid., pp. 42-53, Detailed light of poems.
50. Ibid., p. 36—"सोगे, शुक्के, वुधे बाम, एहि विधि लेका जीतल राम ।
शनि मंगल भोजन कय चलवहु, गेलहु लक्ष्मी पलटि कए बएबहु ॥"

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